The Gates of Sleep

Some scrambled bed-time stories

Zero Philosophy
Dec 15, 2020

20 15

§00 — Mother had fixed the name. That seemed strange now, thinking back. What on earth had she sought to invoke? It had to be something slight and untroubling, certainly.

“Time to pass through the Gates of Sleep,” she’d said, each night. The event was meant to dissolve in familiarity, becoming nothing, as unconsciousness closed in.

As a child I doubted there were true Gates of Sleep. Still, I assumed all time stretched out – already – on the far side of them. In terms I would not then have entertained, I knew eternity sheltered there. It was not a thought I liked.

§01 — An obscure tendril connects every sentient moment to deep sleep. Upon it, horror stubbornly tugs. It can seem, eventually, that each day is no more than an impertinent interruption of endless night.

If each of us had an inside, which nothing else could access, it would all be very different. We could tell ourselves pleasant tales then. They would not be intolerably affecting because we could, at will, retreat into ourselves.

§02 — Sandy wouldn’t sleep.

“What if I don’t wake up?”

“You always wake up.”

“But what if I don’t, this time?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, thoughtlessly. Regret immediately followed. It had to be the worst answer, didn’t it? Oddly, though, it seemed to pacify her. “Okay,” she said. “It’s an enigma, I guess.”

“When did you learn that word?” he asked. Her leaps in vocabulary often surprised him, but rarely this much. “What do you think it means?”

The condescension in the phrasing of the question seemed to annoy her. “Who cares what *I think* it means?” she answered crossly. “The only question is what it means.”

“It’s just … It’s an unusual word,” he pressed. “I certainly didn’t know it at your age.”

“So what did you call things that were hard to understand?”

“You know, I can’t remember! *Mysterious*, maybe,” he tried.

“That has an extra syllable!” she protested.

“So has *enigmatic*.”

“I suppose,” she grumbled. Drowsiness was subverting her combativeness.

“See you in the morning Sweetness,” he said, in restatement of his initial argument. She accepted it this time without obvious resistance.

§03 — Relaying the episode to Laura was a mistake. “Was there really nothing comforting you could have said?” Her eyes were hooded with irritable reproach. “She’s six years old, Jesus!”

“She’s okay,” he mumbled, evasively. It was unconvincing even to him. What he had meant, roughly, was that she wasn’t so different to the way he had been. That wasn’t at all ‘okay’. If not quite the opposite, it was close. The thought was horrible. As he delved into it, the icy distress only grew. There were hints of child sacrifice.

“Did you ever worry about that, when you were a kid?” he asked, more to distract himself than out of genuine interest.

“Did I worry about not waking up?” She puzzled at her memories, and then gave up. “It’s late.”

§04 — His own childhood bed-times had been eerily similar, unless he was remembering it wrong. He still recalled the moment when he had first comprehended the fatal meaning of *deep sleep*. It was an insight so icy it seemed to freeze the blood. There was no true recovery from it. Something was being hidden from him – from everyone. Dreamless sleep was psychological extinction. How could such absolute cessation of consciousness not be considered a regular immersion in death?

“Dad, if I ask you a question, will you promise to answer it truthfully?” he’d asked. He knew his mother wouldn’t. She’d want to keep him safe.

“If I can,” his father answered.

“Do people always die in their sleep?”

“Die how?” It was a better start than the boy had expected.

“Cease to be,” he’d said, in clarification. “Completely cease to exist, you know, become nothing.”

“But then they dream, and wake up.”

“Later,” the boy insisted. “That doesn’t happen until later.”

“But it still happens.”

“So does the other thing.”

The precocity made his father smile, just as that of his granddaughter would have, if he’d lived to see it. The amusement was unfortunate. The thread of concentration snapped.

“Have you been secretly reading philosophy books under the covers?”

“I’m serious Dad.”

But it was too late. That was almost the thread – it being always too late.

§05 — Sleep can be disturbed by frightening stories. These could include frightening stories *about sleep*. Do such stories actually exist? He began to think they were everywhere.

“Can you read me the story about the princess who couldn’t sleep because she was scared of never waking again?” Sandy asked.

“Do I know that one?”

“It’s called Snow White, I think.”

“Snow White isn’t about that.”

“Then what is it about?”

“Mirrors, jealousy, witchcraft – all kinds of stuff,” he said.

Sandy wouldn’t be diverted. “Why did they put her in a coffin if she wasn’t dead?” she asked.

“Who?” he asked, admitting to utter distraction.

“Snow White,” she said.

“They made a mistake, I guess.”

“Why do you think it was a mistake?”

“Don’t worry about it. That story is kind of nuts.”

“They didn’t put Sleeping Beauty in a coffin.”

“That’s because they knew she wasn’t dead.”

“But she couldn’t wake up!”

“She was still breathing.”

“Was Snow White still breathing?”

“I don’t know honey.”

“Do I ever stop breathing in the night?”

“Never ever,” he assured her.

“How do you know?”

“I just do. What happened to Snow White never happened to you.”

She pondered that. He fought back an irrational terror that she would stop breathing out of sheer interrogative stubbornness.

“I don’t know why breathing is so important,” she said at last.

“Breathing is super-important.”

“If Snow White wasn’t breathing, she must have been dead.”

“Nutso story, so who knows?”

“The dwarfs thought she was dead.”

“So we’re told.”

“That’s why they put her in a coffin.”

“Makes sense,” he agreed.

“They can’t have thought she’d ever wake up.”

“No, they can’t have.”

“But you said they made a mistake.”

“Look honey, thing is, Snow White was kind of a one-off case. There’s really not much to learn from it. I promise you the dwarf problem isn’t going to come up.”

“You really promise?’

“Totally,” he said. “Pinky swear and hope to … never mind.”

§06 — At the brink of sleep it returned.

He heard a voice, soft but perfectly clear.

“You’re going to die,” it said. There was no mention of time, or need for one. It meant *tonight*, and *again*.

He only had to recall what had earlier been spoken of. He would die, perhaps within the hour. His whole family would die in the night, as always. The thought was suddenly unbearable.

Nothing at all could be done.

Sleep could not be long postponed. Trying to put it off would only make it worse. It would gather, and deepen.

The point was that death didn’t wait. It was forever perfectly *contemporary*. Postponement was illusion.

This was what every *memento mori* was really for. *You have slept* was quite enough.

Living death was the syndrome in process. Another threshold was crossed, and he slipped down some abstract scree slope into sweating zombie panic.

Imperceptibly, he’d crossed the line. It wasn’t possible to stand upon this plain. Nothing able to stand could occupy it. It had to be crawled.

“Like a worm,” Davies elaborated. “You have to crawl across it like a maimed worm. Slither through the ashes, as if glued to the surface by your own unspooling guts.”

“Is that strictly necessary?” Frobisher muttered.

The protest earned him a cold, withering stare. “There’s no other way,” Davies continued, stepping-up the emphasis. “And then, when you’ve done it, you have to keep doing it, without respite.”

“I’m not quite sure that makes sense,” Frobisher protested. “I mean, the unspooling guts part, in particular, and also that even after doing it you have to do it more. It seems excessive somehow.”

Frobisher is right he wanted to shriek, but he was muted by sleep paralysis. Davies was having none of it. “Like a vile, dying worm,” he insisted, “at best.”

§07 — Each morning had begun to feel like returning from the dead. Some recent extinction of the self shaped it. What could not be remembered, at its core, was this. Contingent forgettings masked an absolute oblivion. Their only heart was darkness. Dreams wrapped themselves around dense void, like the halos of cosmic singularities.

To wake from a dream was to miss the main event. One sought only to recover its trappings. Figments of agency hooked black tatters of nonbeing. They became ghoulish, witch-crafted. Dreams disharmonized into the ragged rhythms of nightmare. The animated shreds of nothingness were in some way hideously recognizable. It was the moment to scream, if only silently.

“What are those things?” you wonder, at once half-intuiting the answer, and knowing the words are all wrong.

A friend broke into his fugue.

“They’re right about one thing, even if they don’t understand why. Nothing returns from the dead.”

Perhaps the insight was no grimmer than it had ever been. Contemporaneity appeared to darken it. It pressed close, like a rag held against the eyes.

There were two ways it could go. He took a guess. “You’re saying nobody exists?”

“That’s the radical implication,” she accepted.

“Couldn’t we be shattered?”

“You mean repeatedly revived?” It sounded like a transhumanist cryogenics fantasy. “How likely is that?”

“What, though, if you die all the time, or at least often?” he asked.

“Then life – *a life* – cannot be anything real.”

“That’s what you think?”

“How could anyone seriously question it?”

“So we believe in our lives because we don’t think enough about sleep?”

“That seems right,” she agreed, after a moment of pondering. “It clicks the most important pieces together. To remember would be annihilation.”

He wanted to accuse her of exaggeration. Carefully retracing the steps of her argument, however, he could not.

“Vast voids separate us from ourselves,” she continued. “We’re good at missing them. I mean, what we are is exactly the same as – and nothing more – than missing them. That *is* us, and it’s allotted from elsewhere.”

“*We’re invented in pieces from the abyss*,” he quoted from something he’d forgotten but knew they shared.

“Yes, like that.”

‘Yes’ sounded too sufficient, as if it weren’t always going to be less than was believed.

§08 — Increasingly, the dreams had been about the impossibility of sleep. Their sense-core was exhaustion, and nothing else. To be tortured by weariness *while sleeping* is a horrible thing. It manifests the inescapable with savage vividness. You’re already doing everything possible to spare yourself, and it does nothing to make a difference. Rest itself appears as a dreamlike illusion. It suggests that in reality there is no rest, or recuperation. Weariness accumulates without end.

“It can’t be a good sign,” she’d said. “Something has to be fundamentally broken.”

There are unmade observations that – once registered – cannot be disaffirmed. This was one of them.

“Probably,” he accepted, without serious reservation. “Now that you say it, how could it not be?”

“It’s abnormal, you know,” she continued. “Anything so hideously paradoxical has to be the sign of a disease.”

“Okay,” he mumbled. She was laying it on too thick. He was dimly aware that her words were triggering some kind of automatic psychological resistance. Lies crowded in. *It’s not so bad*.

“Can we not talk about it?” he said. “It’s pointless.”

§09 — In better days it had all been going somewhere. He had found the project difficult to articulate at first. Long private intimacy with the undertaking allowed it to subside to a level beneath linguistic expression. The right words weren’t stowed for convenient access. It might have worked better to draw some kind of diagram.

“What do you mean, you *explore sleep*?” she asked. It didn’t strike her as a serious occupation. “Are you also working at indolence?”

He found the joke funny, but not enough to be derailed by it.

“Sleep is the frontier that never closes,” he said. “Our limits are found there.”

“So what do you actually do?”

“Travel there, pay attention, and report back – the obvious things.”

“Dozing is the new dowsing?”

“The old dowsing,” he said. “‘New’ has nothing to do with it.”

“But still.”

“Yes, roughly,” he agreed. “It’s a search procedure – if it’s done right. You have to learn not to drop stuff, though. Most of the catch usually escapes. Grip is everything.”

“Is ‘grip’ really the word?”

“It’s the word I have.”

When you begin to bring things back you realize why it was so long discouraged. Most of the specimens are endurable, if often barely so. They’re thought to be slimy because they wriggle out of your grasp. Catching and holding them is an art. Natural talent and disciplined practice are both needed, typically. It advances in a circle.

Dreams are populated by elusive things. While not strictly *ungraspable*, they lend tangibility to the term. The sense of it is demonstrated in being countered. Engagement betrays the intrinsic antagonism. *Slipping away* is then palpably clutched. It’s necessary to have done it to understand.

Thus the recourse to analogies of hunting and – especially – fishing, so prominently manifest throughout the entire span of recorded history, whenever the topic of dreaming is raised. The trapper turns his skills inward, for example. Legends tell of magical nets.

What's the catch? It's a question that belongs at the brink of sleep, if also elsewhere.

"Try to remember your dreams," he was told. "It takes more than that, but the *more* comes that way. The discipline begins to assemble itself."

"Until you life is overflowing with sliminess," he'd joked, except there was no joke.

§10 — Lately, he'd found it steadily harder to stay awake.

"Who is all this sleep supposed to hurt?"

The question was disconcertingly perceptive. There was something suicidal about the chronic fatigue, which meant it was lashing out in various directions. To be weary in this way was an extreme negative affection. *Antipathy* would understate the contempt. *Tired of the world*, while too sweeping, would capture something of it. With lassitude came concealed disgust, and perhaps more deeply concealed hatred. That there was insufficient excitement for obvious rage should not be over-interpreted.

Analysis did nothing to dispel it.

Wrapped in the smothering fog of lassitude, even the slightest task was a struggle. It would surely, always, be easier after a rest, it seemed, but then it wasn't. Or was it that rest had stopped happening?

It could not be that exhaustion was *only* ever a lightly-disguised thirst for death. Yet sometimes it had to be. It would be so much less tiring no longer to carry on. If it was not more ardently suicidal, that was because it lacked ardor generally.

Yet all these bleak miseries were in the end mostly mistaken. He made only a single discovery of note in regard to them. It was error to think of the weariness as a mere deficit. Usually it seemed that way, but then only superficially, when half-noticed, inattentively.

To be tired this way was a positive thing, no less so than vitality. 'Energy' had not run out. The thing masked as 'exhaustion' had its own energy. It pushed. It was on a trajectory to crash through the false wall of sleep. There was a currency denominated in psychological negative numbers. Debts were not easily canceled. Simply forgetting them wouldn't do.

He named his familiar *Sapper*. Always, it was there. It made a demand that pretended to seek an answer in sleep. Then, in the depths of sleep, it kept pushing – which stripped it of its mask. Sleep was not enough for it. No respite was to be found there. The weariness was insatiable. Sleep was merely a stepping-stone for it.

He kept the problem private for as long as possible. He had no inclination to share anything about it. Integral to it was the impossibility of help. The memories of sharing were dreams and lies. To be too scared to sleep is one thing, but to be scared *of sleep* is altogether another.

§11 — In the end, I confess, I stopped listening. His obsession was too exhausting, as if by contagion. My choice would have been to rid myself of its every trace.

§12 — There was one strange dream I remember with special vividness. The setting was a party, long lapsed into nebulous intoxication, yet also sharply picked out. It had lasted far too long, and I wanted to leave. Across the room stood a man I particularly wanted to avoid. I vaguely sensed that he was someone I was supposed to know. Most probably we had been at some point introduced. A tingle of antipathy accompanied this blurred recognition. He had been driven from recollection by aversion, I at once suspected. Now he looked across at me. He was openly reading my expression, and seemed to take satisfaction from my uncertainty.

No doubt he had overheard some fragments of our conversation. I had been saying too much, though I couldn't recall what. It must have been about sleep.

"What is the expression 'tired out' really saying," someone had been asking. Perhaps I groped for a response, or perhaps not. In any case, my oppressor approached.

"You're scared of sleep?" he asked, raising an eyebrow in discreet amusement. It wasn't that. Sleep wasn't the *object* of fear, but its *opportunity*. There was fear, and there was sleep, entangled, but the fear was neither aimed at sleep, nor originated there. I was made afraid *by* sleep, near, or beside it. What scared me was not sleep, but something else. It was the thing that wanted me asleep, in order, then, to do its work. It wasn't necessary to be asleep, for the fear to come, and then be later remembered. All that was needed was for sleep to be something real, that is, for there to *be sleep*.

"It's nothing so straightforward," I answered. "I sleep just fine."

He smiled neutrally. "Of course you do," he said.

"I've known people with sleep disorders, so I can confidently tell you I'm not one of them. I'm nothing like them." I restrained myself before adding *at all*. "There was one guy in particular," I began, but stopped.

“There’s no need to convince me.” His manner was insolently disengaged. A soft chuckle accompanied the words.

Indignation, I knew, would only carry me further into pointless unpleasantness. I got up to leave.

“Oh, one more thing,” he said. “Without wanting to be intrusive, I have to ask. Do you ever dream about sleep?”

The question was cruelly penetrating.

“Why do you care?” I answered, uninterested in hiding my annoyance.

“You could consider it professional concern, on my part.”

“Or alternatively, I could not consider it at all.”

He gave no sign of being affected by my abrasiveness. His smile did not tremble. “It’s obviously eating at you – or feeding on you,” he said. “I’ve seen it before. It doesn’t end well.”

“What doesn’t?” I replied, still infuriated, and now trapped. I could see no way to break from the exchange without seeming to flee. There was something in his manner that struck me almost as gloating. He circled – figuratively speaking – like a predator, or perhaps a scavenger. Far too much private entertainment was alight in his eyes.

“A good night’s sleep is rarely a bad thing,” he said. “Though it’s doubtful you would remember. There are things in this world that aren’t sick.”

I would probably have bristled at the insult, had I been less tired.

“‘Sickness’ has vague boundaries.”

“You don’t really mean that,” he said, with enraging confidence. “You say it only to say something – as a defense. It’s better to accept a need for help.”

“And you can help?” It would have been impossible to add to the sarcastic torsion.

“Of course,” he replied, still unflustered. “That’s what I do. I’m an interpreter.”

“How are those things the same?”

There was nothing – at least right then – I wanted less than his story about me. In truth, I didn’t even want my own.

I knew he wouldn't remotely understand.

To fear a killer can be confused with fearing death. Of course, the two can be intimately connected, certainly if the 'killer' is sufficiently abstracted, but this is a real confusion, nonetheless. The relevance of the point, here, is surely undisguised. "What you *really* fear is death," I had been told, frequently enough. The misapprehension first began to bore, and later to irritate me. To correct it would require trouble beyond my tolerance. For the point to be raised meant that discussion was pointless. It was less paradoxical than simply wearying.

Consider horror of unconsciousness. The structure is comparable, or even – ultimately – identical. Its object is equally the condition of its annihilation. In other words, the phobia is a reprieve. Fear is twisted in the direction of its own end. This is true perversity.

"Did you know that sometimes people hide their sicknesses from doctors? It's the strangest thing. By 'hide' I mean more than conceal, but actually protect. They fight alongside their maladies when pressed."

"Perhaps there are doctors who are worse than diseases. And also," my words were becoming a little wild, slurred by more than drink. "How can it be okay to be 'pressed'?"

"You feel pressed?"

The caricature of medical solicitude was so extreme I should have known it for part of a dream. It was not in any respect well-disguised. Public humiliation, delirium, a kind of Escherian escalation – all were there.

"No, I don't feel anything real," I said, much more coldly. "It's all a lie."

"You're tired of it all, I think. Do you imagine waking, refreshed?" From his tone it was clear that he envisaged any such hope as a pitiful delusion.

"I'm not talking to you," I said.

"Oh, but you are."

"Any more, I mean," I clarified petulantly. "You bore me. This is supposed to be a party."

No part of what I said was honestly convincing to me, and as I looked around it became less so. The surfaces were swimming, without losing detail. Everything had been designed to look mad and fake. Among my companions, the level of derangement far exceeded all natural bounds. Their devotion to getting poly-dimensionally wasted would have tested a Greek mystery cult.

Beside the Sleep Therapist, in his sensible business suit, the entire event was preposterous. Now that it wasn't pretending seriously to be real, the other party-goers were turning into the worst sort of animals – baboons, hyenas, and spoilt hairless cats.

"You know this is garbage?" I asked unnecessarily, addressing myself to the whole room, though few if any were listening. "It's wrong and isn't happening."

The condescending smile of the Sleep Therapist drilled into me like a toothpaste advert.

A spoilt hairless cat in a girl costume came up to us, with something green in her cocktail glass. "Was it blackness, or blindness?" she asked. "The distinction wasn't the ultimate thing – not quite. But it reached the edge, palpably. There was a crossing, at exactly the place where the absence of vision switched over into a vision of absence. There, deprivation inverts. It touches upon the Mysteries of the Cave. Plato completely misses it. He looks in the wrong direction. Images enthrall him. Darkness is never more for him than gloom. Thus, he misplaces the absolute. He promises a superior phantasmagoria, and no more. Still less does he suspect still less."

The Sleep Therapist was backing away, appalled, which delighted me. I wanted him to trip over something and fall, but he didn't. Still, it was okay.

The cat hadn't finished. "Eyes open onto raw unseeing," she explained. "Reaching down into the depths of the organism, it finds itself thrilled. There is an ecstasy in this horrible exhilaration of the uttermost end. Quickening occurs there. Pulses race. The stimulation is unexpected, and unprecedented. Nothing remotely like it could have been anticipated. Memory is eluded similarly. Whatever can be brought back is something else." She paused, as if recollecting something. "That singularity is reached in the obliteration of all distinction is itself a soft shock. One could not have been looking here – not deliberately. The encounter is essentially accidental. Much more can be said, precisely because there is nothing to say. In these depths, attention is outmatched. There is nothing to find, or cling to, and then only that."

***

Note

Since everything done here is an incessant crime against Carnap, a brief comment is called for.

Fundamental ontology is a logically incorrect application of *nothing*, Carnap argues. One might say he asserts that there is *nothing to think* here, but that would be to court ambivalence. What Heidegger seeks endlessly to say, need not – and *should* not – be said. It perhaps *cannot* be said (they agree).

To revisit these sentences is to re-stage an episode of profound fission. Things dramatically part ways. Obscure rupture becomes formal break. It can be seen now, unmistakably, why we can't agree, even when that very point is our sole item of agreement. Such moments are precious, beyond easy estimation. The separations that fundamentally define us begin in them. To take sides would be confusion. It is the split that matters. Different considerations of nothingness divide the way.

It is the same with the history of Western religion. Schism has no authentic perspective. No cause can represent it. Each cause, on the contrary, confuses itself with the universal. Schismatics do not make schism, but only ever the inverse. *Schism schisms*, the master might have said. Whether the word is repeated as a verb or a plural noun, it discriminates similarly. Seismic disintegration registers an after-shock. Even the breaking is broken. From *what one imagines it can say* there is every time a further step. Each rift leads further out.

That about nothingness to which all can accede *does not exist*. Even this, it can only be suspected, is divisive.

15 Comments

Write a comment...

[[Aramis77]] Dec 15, 2020

I think this is my favorite piece on this site so far, excellently done. I have a strange feeling that this one is more personal than the rest.

♡ 3 Reply Collapse

M(ileto) E- Feb 13, 2021

tHIS IS GOOD

♡ 2 Reply Collapse

13 more comments...

© 2023 Zero Philosophy · Privacy · Terms · Collection notice

Substack is the home for great writing